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CABLE TV NOTES

Portrait of a 'Cambridge Spy'

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What with "one thing and another," Alan Bennett says wearily, he hasn't been getting out much lately.

By one thing and another, the self-deprecating playwright means the rave reviews that have greeted the current West End revival of "Forty Years On," his 1968 musical celebration of the ideals and idiocies of England, the filming of his first feature film, and the negotiations for the American rights for his award-winning television play "An Englishman Abroad," about one of the so-called Cambridge spies, Guy Burgess.

In the United States, "An Englishman Abroad," which stars Alan Bates under John Schlesinger's direction, is to be presented in an unusual joint manner: It will be shown this Tuesday evening at 9 on cable television's Arts and Entertainment Network and then on Friday at the same hour on Channel 13 as a public-television "Great Performance."

In March, the British Broadcasting Press Guild named the hour-long television script the best single drama of 1983. Mr. Bates was named best actor for his portrayal of Burgess and the Australian actress Coral Browne won the best actress award, portraying herself.

The play is based on a true story told to Mr. Bennett by Miss Browne, who met Burgess while she was on tour with the Stratford Company in Moscow in 1958, when he stumbled into a dressing room and vomited in the sink. Burgess has been denounced as a spy in 1951 while serving as a Second Secretary at the British Embassy in Washington. He disappeared and turned up in Moscow in 1956, along with Kim Philby and Donald MacLean. The three became known as the "Cambridge spies" because they had been recruited by the Soviets in the 1930's while they were students at Cambridge University.

The play's main action takes place in Burgess' seedy Moscow apartment. Despite attempts by British Embassy officials to dissuade her, Miss Browne, intrigued and charmed by the enigmatic yet eminently likable Burgess, accepts his invitation to lunch and complies with his request to bring a tape measure.

She subsequently measures him for new clothes she agrees to order from his London tailor. (The package she eventually sent included pajamas and a new Eton tie.) The two spend the afternoon listening to Jack Buchanan sing "Who Stole My Heart Away?" over and over. It is the only phonograph record Burgess has. They then go to a church, where Burgess is pictured listening to music with tears streaming down his face.

Except for a few scenes that were rearranged for dramatic effect — Burgess actually threw up in Michael Redgrave's dressing room, not Miss Browne's — the play is faithful to the facts in most details. Locations in Glasgow and Dundee were substituted for the Russian exteriors in the play, which is set in Moscow and London.

While settling himself into a straight-backed armchair, his six-foot frame collapsing as neatly as a bridge table, the 50-year-old playwright, best known to American theater-goers for his "Habeas Corpus" and earlier as one of the authors and stars of "Beyond the Fringe," recently discussed what it was about Miss Browne's anecdote that prompted him to turn it into a television script.

Characteristically, Mr. Bennett said that he feels the play has attracted attention for the wrong reasons, mainly "because people are interested in spies." Mr. Bennett is not. It is the exile, not the spy, in Burgess that intrigued him, he explained. Though "An Englishman Abroad" is set in Moscow — Mr. Bennett has not been there but studied Russian along with fellow playwright Michael Frayn as part of his army service — its theme, like that of "Forty Years On" and much of his other work, is Englishness and the extent to which people, in or out of their countries, are prisoners of their nationality. In the final scene, for example, Burgess is seen crossing a snowy Moscow bridge in a bowler hat and umbrella like any London City banker.

"I think an exile has much more intense feelings about his country than someone still here. And certainly that was true of Burgess," Mr. Bennett said. "People say about exiles and about the Cambridge spies in particular that they wanted England to be simply a colony of Russia and as gray and featureless as a communist state. But it seems to me that that's the opposite of the case. They seem to suffer from an overdose of Englishness and why they betray their country is, in a sense, that their country's already betrayed itself. In American terms, the same could be said of Alger Hiss. He was absolutely American to the core and a good equivalent to the Cambridge people.

"I think spies have done far less damage to this country than people who've been knighted and awarded the Queen's Award for industry when you think of the total destruction of the fabric of this country and the cities and the mess we've made of it."

To get a sense of Burgess' character, Mr. Bennett explained that he relied on letters Burgess had written to Miss Browne. "I knew he was a theatrical person when Coral told me about him playing the record over and over," he said. "He is so absorbed in his own world that he doesn't see she has mixed emotions about it. She had been engaged to Jack Buchanan and he had jilted her. It was an amazing coincidence."

Like many of his characters, Mr. Bennett has mixed feelings about his native country. " 'So little, England,' Burgess says in the play, 'timid, tasteful, nice. But one loves it, one loves it.' That is how I feel," the playwright said. "English people are interested in class, accent and social position, not in the larger issues, and that's our downfall really. We make fun of Americans for being so grave. But we are riddled by irony. Negated, nullified by irony.

"Yet," he continued, "I am very English and many of the people I admire most are — Philip Larkin, John Betjeman. One must, after all, be what one is."

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Humor is the way Mr. Bennett resolves such conflicting emotions. "People think if you make fun of something, it's because you dislike it, you're doing it to set the world to rights," he said. "But it's not that at all. What gives you the right to make fun of things is if you love them. The things you make fun of best are the ones you have affection for. A lot of people didn't understand 'Forty Years On' because its both serious and funny. The English think you have to be one or the other. I like to go back and forth."

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Mr. Bennett lives in north London, in N.W. 1, a postal district he made famous with a television series, "The Life and Times of N.W. 1," which poked fun at the upwardly mobile, trendy young marrieds in this London equivalent of Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Mr. Bennett's house, unlike those of his neighbors, is not "knocked through" into an open space (one episode in the series was called "The Knockers Through"). It is a series of dark, quasi-Victorian rooms burgeoning with paintings, blue-and-white Staffordshire china and dozens of photographs of groups of people — soldiers, children at school picnics, graduates swaddled in black. What he likes about them, Mr. Bennett said, is "the patina."

He lives alone and said that he prefers the company of actors more than that of his literary colleagues. ("Actors are nicer than writers.") He often acts in his own plays. In the original version of "Forty Years On," he was highly praised for his portrayal of a junior headmaster who delivers sex-education lectures with a hand on his students' tempting thighs and a Wildean dowager in drag who, feeling a draft, decides to go put on another rope of pearls.

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These days Mr. Bennett spends as much time as possible in New York. He usually has dinner at a restaurant in SoHo that was started by one of the actors from the original "Forty Years On" with his backing.

"I am totally besotted with New York," he said, his impenetrable owlishness giving way to a grin. "London life seems today to me to be churlish, avaricious and grudging, whereas New York is vigorous, generous and witty. People talk to each other in the street. They make up their language as they go along, something we have long since ceased to do."

But the best aspect of New York, Mr. Bennett observed, is the joking. "The thing about equality in New York," he said, "is if there is a joke, anyone can make it. Maître d's make jokes. Waiters make jokes. That's true democracy. In England, they wouldn't feel in a social position to do it." ■